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TESTIMONY BEFORE THE HOUSE SUBCOMMITTEE ON
CRIMINAL JUSTICE, DRUG POLICY AND HUMAN RESOURCES
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For nearly twelve years I had the honor to serve our nation as the executive chef of Blair House, The Presidential Guest House. During my “tour of duty” I served President’s Ronald Reagan, George H.W. Bush, and Bill Clinton, as well as nearly every world leader of this era. My position here in our nation’s capitol afforded me many remarkable opportunities and experiences – the flag flown over the Capitol building on April 7, 1993 flew in honor of my fortieth birthday.

Today, I am the author of two successful cookbooks, my work has appeared in several top food magazines, and I continue to contribute food-related articles to publications like the *Washington Post*. Rather than write a so-called celebrity chef publication – some sort of self-serving kiss-and-tell filled with important names and how I saved the day phrases – I’ve chosen to write books that draw on my interest in our rich American heritage and the anthropology and evolution of American cuisine; books that encourage quality family time, promote a sense of community, and foster traditional American values.

Since my first cookbook, *A Return to Sunday Dinner*, was published in 2003, I have concluded over 60 radio and press interviews, including on National Public Radio and in USA TODAY. I have appeared on many national and regional televisions shows, and of course, appeared at numerous book signings and special events - most notably Author’s Night at the National Press Club. Today, I continue to speak about building family traditions to church and civic groups and was invited in 2004 to be the key note speaker for the Southern Women’s Expo. In the spring of 2005, my second cookbook, *A Return to Family Picnics*, was published with solid reviews in the *New York Times* and in over 200 daily newspapers with *The Associated Press*. In June of last year, I completed a live national satellite media tour from New York, covering 22 media markets, across four time zones, in six hours.

My family-value message is not marketing plan. In August, my wife and I will celebrate our thirty-fourth anniversary. She works for Fairfax County Public Schools. We are the parents of three adult children.

The one subject I have not spoken about publicly, and something people generally do not know about me is that I was addicted to Methamphetamine or “speed” during my adolescent years. Indeed, you’d be hard pressed to find anyone one in Washington, D.C. or anyone I’ve worked with in the hospitality industry over the past 30 years who would believe such a past struggle was even a remote possibility. There is little about my life or conversation to suggest I once faced such desperate and self-destructive behavior.

I find no pleasure in telling or even recalling a self-imposed hell that is so far removed from my life. But the epidemic sweeping our country has compelled me to come forward and tell my story – it is a story of restoration and redemption. I come here today as a private citizen with no connection to any political party, public policy organization, health care provider, treatment center, or advocacy group.

I never met my father. I am the youngest of four children, and my parents divorced when I was just a baby. Although my mother never remarried, the four of us found our lives surrounded by the nurturing care of our wonderful extended family. For many years we lived with our grandparents. My mother worked during the day and took night classes to better her secretarial skills like shorthand, accounting, and stenography. She eventually began her own business – a secretarial service that provided support to a variety of family-owned business and local construction companies.

My spiral into the drug cultural began at age twelve, in 1965, and my life soon became a shattered mess that reflected the chaos of the turbulent times, following those pied-pipers who called us to “tune in, turn-on and drop out.” By 1967, just after my fourteenth birthday, while looking for better thrill, I fell into the frightening world of methamphetamines – a desperate addiction that continued over the next three years.

Despite my young age, older family members, neighbors, and classmates brought me into close contact with the music scene of Hollywood and the street scene of San Francisco and Venice Beach, California. My association with the drug culture brought me into close contact with characters from motorcycle gang members and UCLA graduate students wishing to make a quick buck in garage-based labs set up in and around the hills and canyons above Santa Monica, Ventura, and Malibu.

Methamphetamine is different than other drugs. Using methamphetamines is not about escapism – staying up for days and weeks on end without sleep is no escape from reality. Methadrene addiction is self-destruction – it is a slow suicide – it is also a visible call for help.

I knew full-well the risks and down-side of Methamphetamine use – “speed kills/speed thrills” was a catch-phrase. My spiral into the hell of meth addiction was severe – self mutilation, chaos, psychotic episodes with frightening and violent hallucinations and dementia. I came frighteningly close to firing a pump-action shot gun through my bedroom window to fend off the imaginary police surrounding my home; I came even closer to pulling the trigger to end the madness my life had become – I know those who did and those who died by the needle.

We were not children of unfortunate circumstances. The Los Angeles community where I grew up was similar to the local communities surrounding Washington, D.C., like Arlington and Falls Church. We were middle class and upper middle class families. My friends’ parents were real-estate brokers, doctors, contractors, school teachers, dentists, retail business owners, airline executives, and engineers or draftsmen for companies like Douglas, Hughes, and Northrop.

I am not one who believes drug addiction is a disease, per se – it is an illness yes, but it is not something you can “catch” as though it were the measles or chicken pox anymore than you can catch VD. Drug addiction is self-inflicted. No one ever held a gun to my head and made me stick a needle in my arm.

I do understand the idea and desire to let people off the hook and provide an emotional short-term “feel-better” fix. Those who have such a low self-image that they are willing to engage in this kind of deadly behavior do not need to have guilt dumped on them. But the loss of personal responsibility, while attractive in the short term, can also take away the impetus for

change – if we are simply creatures of our genetic make up, some predisposition, or unfair twist of fate we are sadly condemned and unable to rise above our circumstances.

Equally, I am deeply concerned that some have suggested Methamphetamine addiction cannot be effectively treated – my life is clear evidence such a thought is not in the least bit true. And what kind of message does this view send to those who struggle? That they are condemned to a life of addictive behavior and without hope?

The years between 1965 and 1970 found me in and out of the juvenile court system and eventually to the California Youth Authority. I completed the tenth grade in 1968 at the Fred C. Nellis School for Boys, where I worked in the library and participated in a program of encounter groups and psychotherapy. I owe a lot to some very dedicated councilors and to a parole officer who was more concerned about seeing me delivered rather than keeping my locked up.

My road to recovery began with a simple act: An uncle finding me dazed, my body reduced to that of some holocaust survivor, put his arm around me and invited me in to have something to eat. There was no scolding, no lecture, and no condemnation - just loving concern served with a bowl of peaches. Today, I applauded groups like C.A.S.A. who foster the values found around the family table.

It does take a village. An effective drug treatment program - especially for the highly addictive methamphetamine – must be comprehensive. Faith in God, the support of my church, my family, teachers, and community organizations – coupled with viable quality psychological counseling and a state-run system that worked - brought me to a place of transformation and renewal in 1970.

One of the first jobs I took as I rebuilt my life was that of a prep cook: chopping onions, peeling shrimp, cleaning lettuce, and cutting French fries. You have to start somewhere and I did have basic cooking skills that I had gained in my grandmother's kitchen helping with holiday meals or Sunday dinner and helping my mom to get dinner on the table during a busy week.

Still, without a high school diploma, little consistent work experience and a troubled adolescence, I faced many challenges. People were not eager to hire me. But it only takes one exception. When I was interviewed for my first full-time job the chef explained that he had a policy of hiring the worst applicant. His thought was that if you gave someone a second-chance, as someone had once given him, a person would rise to the opportunity and work harder than someone with other choices. His views would carry over throughout my professional career.

In 1971, just after my 18th birthday, I graduated high school with a GED through Santa Monica Community College. I was encouraged to continue my formal education and go on to college, but cooking was my passion and I would make this my chosen craft.

Employees are every organization's greatest assets – worthy of the time and resources needed to develop and instill possibilities and potential. This is a major role of resource management. Being an executive chef is part baby sitter, part marriage counselor, part drug counselor, part cop, part coach, and part psychologist.

Working with lower income employees who had limited training, limited educations, and limited opportunities was a challenge. I met those challenges by listening and by recognizing that the outside influences faced by employees also affected their performances. In an inner-city environment substance abuse and domestic violence can run rampant. When I was in the hospitality industry, I found that many of my employees were affected by these social plagues. I have personally paid an employee's rent or covered their time off for treatment to compensate for the limited resources available – especially to those with lower incomes.

The social fabric of America has changed. Too often teachers are no longer a part of the communities where they work – most cannot afford to be. The lack of affordable health care means a family whose children struggle with an addictive behavior, have few outlets for professional treatment.

I know families who have mortgaged their lives, lost their homes, or spent their life savings to save the life of a child. I know families who have seen their children relapse into the frightening hell of drug addiction simply because the 30-day maximum for mental health treatment and 20 annual follow up counseling sessions have run out. These are the fortunate ones – the ones with health care. To my knowledge Fairfax County, one of the country's most affluent communities, has only one facility available for these kinds of programs. While we readily witness some self-indulgent pop star or Hollywood actor checking into a \$2000.00 a day treatment center, the average American family is too often left on their own.

According to a recent *Washington Post* article Americans feel more and more isolated and have fewer people they can confide in during times of difficulty. Robert Putman has chronicled these alarming social trends in his monumental work, *Bowling Alone: the Decline and Revival of American Community*.

I am concerned about the mixed messages we send out. Today we seem to have a lock-them-up and throw-away-the-key mentality. I am especially concerned about this when it comes to juvenile justice – fourteen, fifteen, and sixteen year olds are not adults. I do believe we should have little tolerance for those who manufacture and distribute dangerous drugs for profit – truly "the love of money is the root of all evil." Today's methamphetamine is very different than it once was. It is not more powerful, rather it is less pure. And those who market their witches-brew of toxic chemicals for the sake of profit are a pariah on society and should be dealt with accordingly. But those who do so to support a habit must be treated as victim and perpetrator. I truly wonder with today's "get tough" policies if I would have had the same opportunity to rebuild and reclaim my life as I did thirty-five years ago.

I was fortunate. My arrests and convictions all took place before my eighteenth birthday. And because I successfully completed my parole without incident for five years from my release from the California Youth Authority, my juvenile record was expunged, as it should have been. While legally I could state that I had no arrest record or criminal record, I chose to reveal all of my past to investigators, in 1987, when I applied for the position as Executive Chef of Blair House.

But by far, the next twelve years would be the most memorable segment of my career. Finally, the difficulties of my adolescence were behind me. The vetting process, where I had my

life combed through, and through which I received the necessary Top Secret security clearance, took on a tremendous personal importance as my past was truly put to rest. **Trustworthiness is not about perfection, it is about honesty.**

Still, in 1994, when I was asked to consider moving from Blair House to be the White House chef, I asked that I not be considered. There were many reasons for my decision, but with three school-age kids and no way to explain or defend myself in a public forum, I chose to remain under the radar – it is a decision I do not regret. Not that anyone would really care about my story or my testimony or my position. I'd just become fodder for an attack on someone else – it is a Washington blood-sport. One meant to avoid addressing and discussing the real the issues at hand and instead discredit those we appose and distract from the real message.

And what is the message we send when those outside the beltway witness the political battles that dig up a past long forgotten? We sent a clear message: one can only dare climb so far. That message was clear to me. I believe to be fully redeemed we must be fully restored. William Penn believed that. And when he and his followers laid the plans for Philadelphia – the first American city – they built a penitentiary rather than a prison. A place of solitude where one could consider their actions, come to "penitence" and return to society.

I am not a recovered addict one slip away from remission. I am a highly successful profession, a father and a husband married 34 years, a church member, and member of my community who long ago – almost in another life – struggled with addiction because I struggle with self-doubt, self-hatred, self-destruction and a disillusioned moral crisis. **Addiction is a symptom of a deeper plague; to effectively treat addiction we must address the root cause. Left untreated, it will only reappear or resurface in a different form.**

I am here by God's grace to be sure, but I am here because those around me cared enough to come along side me and offer help. Perhaps one must pull oneself up by the boot-straps and stop making excuses, but it sure helps to have those in the community who can provide those boots and teach you to walk a straight line.

My story is one of success. I'm the one for whom the system worked: Where the unconditional love of family, community support, government resources, faith-based organizations, self-determination, and good council came together the save a life. For over 35 years I lived my life as a productive member of society and followed my craft with honor and distinction.